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ABSTRACT

Literacy is inextricably linked to the social context in which literacy is taught, and in which the language is used. Cultural expectations require the use of specific literacies. Who a person is, in terms of a literacy user and a literacy worker are dictated by the culture in which a person chooses to operate. Literacy is not neutral, but an integral part of the society in which it exists, a social construct that may be mastered and used for specific social purposes. A look at the experiences of two generations of a family of working class black Americans shows how literacy can be status-giving, yet bring social ostracism. Literacies acquired from the classroom and from employment were the outcome of cultural transmission, which must occur for the communicator to be considered literate within the culture. Conflicts for a young Black man arose, however, when the literacy acquired in school or through life experience and travel was different from that of his peers, suspending his sense of belonging to that culture. He now wonders who he is, and who his children will be. These experiences attest to the fact that literacy does affect how people participate in their society; social context helps define specific literacies. Autonomous literacy, for example, would not generate the social ostracism experienced by a Black person who is uncomfortable conversing in the black vernacular. This social suspension is evidence that in practice, literacy is deeply embedded in culture. (PRA)

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Lester William Knotts

Chapter I

Personal Literacy Experience

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Chapter I

Personal Literacy Experience

When I returned to college as a graduate student I hoped to be challenged academically, but I never expected to search my personal experience so deeply in support of a thesis. My studies at Oregon State have forced me to examine my beliefs about literacy and challenged me to to take a position among the litigants in the literacy debate. And I have.

One of the litigants is Jack Goody. He would say that functional literacy in an autonomous model is a neutral skill. He and those who agree with him claim that literacy produces cognitive consequences in rationality, critical thinking and a facility with abstract concepts and logical processes. According to this view, a person is literate or he is not, and a great gulf divides those whocan manage logical thought and those who cannot. In this argument literacy operates independent of other social processes. It stands alone in its universal application, and by this application we can assess literates and illiterates.

An opposing perspective on literacy is the ideological model posited by Brian Street. According to Street, reading and writing are social practices embedded in cultural and economic systems. Street expands upon ruth Finnegan's idea to make a point about his ideological model:

> Focussing on the uses of literacy and orality means shifting attention away from the search for universals, ideal types

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> or human development in general terms to a more detailed investigation into actual choices in specific societies. (Street, 96)

Street extends this argument against the autonomous (universal and neutral) model of literacy. He adds that in order to more fully assess the problems with conclusions drawn from studies in which literacy is treated as autonomous, researchers must study the structural, political and ideological features of the society in question. According to Street and Finnegan, focusing on the technology of literacy oversimplifies literacy. Street wants us to be aware that even before socially-embedded application, the selection of specific literacy technologies is itself derived from ideological purpose, and so cannot be separated from the society as an independent or neutral thing.

I, too, believe that literacy is inextricably linked to the social context in which literacy is taught, and in which the language is used. In this section of my thesis I intend to show that cultural expectations require the use of specific literacies. Who I am in terms of a literacy user and a literacy worker are dictated by the culture in which I choose to operate. My position that literacy is embedded in culture comes through my own personal experiences and those of my parents. Since I began writing on this subject I have tapped my own experiences through writing and reviewing personal essays. I have been on the phone with my parents, and have gone down to Sugarland to record my parents as they discussed their reading and writing (literacy)

experiences. These working class Black Americans consider education to be the way fortheir children to improve their lives. To them and to me, literacy is not neutral, but an integral part of the society in which it exists, a social construct that may be mastered and used for specific social purposes (Street, 97 & Griswold, 28).

My parents bagan their mastery of literacies as children. Raymond, my father, grew up working the rice and cotton fields of Sugarland, Texas. Mother grew up within walking distance of Raymond, the fields, and the predominantly black, single-room rural school house they both attended. When the sliding partition was pulled across the inside of the building, the teacher on one side taught kindergarden through fourth grade. On the pther side a teacher taught fifth through eighth.

My grandfather bought my dad a first grade primer to study at home. Ben, daddy's older brother, read the primer to him. At five years of age, raymond was allowed to attend school twice per week. Because of the necessity of doing seasonal labor in the cotton fields, Pop left school finally in the seventh grade. In six years he had learned to read and write well enough to understand and work in his world.

Mother attended school through the eighth grade. Her uncle had taught her the alphabet, and she could read and write a bit before shw started school. Those primer skills set her and my father at the head of the class, and brought them together for a lifetime. In mother's words: "We were the teacher's star pupils . . . that's what got us together in the first place." The

obvious pride with which this was spoken tells me that mother realized in elementary school that her literacy was status-giving. Her enthusiasm for being at the head of her class helps explain why my parents so strongly emphasize the importance of education to all of their children.

When my father enlisted in the Army, he found that his seventh-grade literacy was not enough. Pop told me about the specific event that made him realize that literacy could be liberating. In the Army, those men who scored well on the aptitude tests had more job and school choices. This was in Dad's favor, since he had scored high enough to be retained in the service when the Korean conflict ended. His family was getting larger, and he needed the steady income. It was in the Army that Pop was able to complete his high school equivalency as a corporal. He says of that experience: "Education is the THING!" Pop had made a transition. He recognized that his ability to negotiate paperwork provided him job security.

Pop in the Army, and mother at home understood through their experiences that specific literacies were tools to gain a professional or social advantage. Had they not come to this understanding, we would not have been so greatly encouraged to by them to continue with education, nor would they have taught us as they did at home. Specific social constructs at school and in the military required certain literacies of my parents. Brian Street would agree that socially required literacy is the norm, but he would stop short of suggesting that mastering those requisite literacies is liberating for the users.

My parents can claim proficiency in Southern Black Texan and Northern White Wisconsinite literacies. They can also use several professional literacies acquired in the course of socially organized practices. The several literacies acquired from the classroom, and later from Mother's canning factory work and Pop's Army duties were the outcome of cultural transmission (Scribner, 72). This cultural transmission can be subtle (as in the classroom) or overt (as my mother taught it), but transmission must occur for the communicator to be considered literate within the culture.

My ownliteracy conditioning did not begin in the classroom, but started with my mother correcting my language at home at an early age. My father was reassigned to a remote air defense site in Northern Wisconsin in 1962. As a result of that move we became the only Black family in New Richmond, Wisconsin. An etiquette book and a Bible were the main resources Mother used to correct my speech and behavior. She was intent on having the entire family fit into our new all-white community. The etiquette book became our transition manual from rural Southern Black behavior to White middle class behavior. I was four then. I was also oblivious to the role that literacy was playing to integrate me into a new social environment. Mother was conscious of the need, and did her best to make the transition work.

Mother must hev also used the language from television and radio to correct my speech. She would insist that I define slang terms and then discard them for more acceptable language. She constantly asked me "How does that sound?" and admonished me to

stop using "ignorant talk" which had been acceptable language back in Texas. In Texas it was O.K. to answer the telephone with "Who dis is?" In Wisconsin that response rapidly gave way to "Hello, this is the Knotts residence," as soon as I could say it all.

When I left Wisconsin at the end of the fourth grade, I was proficient ina single academic literacy. The move to central Kansas was an adjustment to a wide variety of dialogues and dialects. I moved into a military community where everyone was from somewhere else. Until that time, what I learned at home had matched what I learned in and out of the classroom. Now there was conflict. Different patterns of speech and written language were used and accepted by the teachers and by my classmates. The patterns were not always the same as my own. Slang, profanity and Black English converged on the playground. Peers pressured me to abandon the classroom English. Clinging to my formal style of of academic speaking began to have a price. I was left out of certain peer groups. The conflict continued through the sixth, seventh and eighth grades in West Germany. As a ninth-grader in Florida the conflict peaked.

When we moved to Miami in 1972, Mother selected our off-base residence near Homestead Air Force Base where my father was stationed. In Miami the separation between White, Black and Cuban communities was distinct. Mother chose a house in South Miami Heights, a White suburb of the city. Each Sunday we drove across town to all-Black Richmond Heights to attend church. Mother made "actual choices in specific societies" about the

exposure she wanted for children. It was tough decision-making. The costs for her deciding to live in South Miami meant the inconvenience of getting to church each week coupled with a degree of social isolation.

From South Miami I was bused to Mays Junios High School. The bus made a circuitous route to pick up a mix of Black and White kids. The Blacks would congregate in the back of the bus (even then I thought it ironic), and the Whites would fill up seats from the front. After school each day I would race to to the bus to be among the first aboard for the ride home. I had to first so that I could sit in the middle of the bus--this way I avoided having to choose between sitting with the Blacks or Whites. My language was not the same as the Blacks, and was the source of disparaging remarks from my Black peers because I sounded White. To sit with the Whites opened me up to a different barrage of insults for choosing White friends over Blacks. As the bus filled from both ends, the decision of which side I was on was made for me.

I discussed my conflict with my father. He confirmed for me that the language taught in school was just as valid as the street talk. I became emboldened to continue using my academic literacy in spite of the ridicule for "talking proper" like a White person.

After another year in Kansas our family returned to Texas. The year was 1975, and by then both of my parents wrote and spoke at the institutional end of the continuum between Black English Vernacular ( ) and the institutionalized English of the schools,

courts, and television news. They had been travelling foprthirty years by the time they finally resettled in Sugarland. Their language was distinctly different from the language of those with whom they had attended grade school. Had they not been raised in the area, the language barrier would have been enough to isolate them from the Blacks in the community. Since they have moved back home among friends and family the difference tends to give them a certain elevated status at church and at work. My parents are more "worldly" than their contemporaries, and their language is evidence of that.

As I and my parents can attest, literacy does affect how we participate in our society, and certainly not in a neutral way. There are costs for acquiring social and economic literacies. It is plain to me that social context helps define specific literacies. My examples lend support to an ideological approach to literacy, whether or not the literacy gives status. Among the social costs to me resulting from my adopted literacy is that as an adult I now find myself uncomfortable conversing with Blacks. When I raise children, they will likely be another step removed from Black culture, since I cannot teach them Black English Vernacular. I place a high value on the preservation of culture, and thus the cost is significant. What is at stake here is who I am, and who my children will be. I placed a a great faith in the words and experiences of my parents that the literacies they encouraged me to use were best for me. They could not have realized the degree of social ostracism I would experience due to that academic literacy and how my sense of belonging is suspended

at times between Black and White cultures. Nor could they have predicted how their own literate evolution would place them in a somewhat socially distanced position in their hometown. Autonomous literacy would not generate such difficulties. That a literacy change is a proximate cause of my social suspension and their altered social position is evidence that in practice literacy is deeply embedded in culture.

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